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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PROMOTES PEACE AND BUILDS GOODWILL DURING
THANKSGIVING TRIP TO ZAMBOANGA

REFS: A. Manila 2536

[1](#)B. Manila 2615

[1](#)1. (U) Summary. The Ambassador visited Zamboanga City November 24 to strengthen relations with key partners in the Mindanao peace process. She also used the visit to promote goodwill by highlighting U.S. projects that promote health and education for the people in the region, and by delivering a personal Thanksgiving greeting on a popular local radio station. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Background. As home to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Western Mindanao Command, Zamboanga City is critical to the success of the U.S. mission to help bring peace and prosperity to conflict-affected areas in Mindanao. Zamboanga's AFP base hosts U.S. troops who serve as members of the Joint Special Operations Task Force of the Philippines (JSOTF-P), who provide non-combat assistance to the AFP on projects of mutual interest. Along with security cooperation and training efforts with the AFP, the U.S. troops work with the AFP on community development, health, and infrastructure projects. End background.

PROMOTING PEACE

[1](#)3. (U) The Ambassador joined Commander, Western Mindanao Command Lt. Gen. Nelson Allaga and JSOTF-P and AFP officials for a Thanksgiving-themed breakfast meeting at the AFP's Zamboanga base. General Allaga told the Ambassador that the MILF and Philippine Government continue to work towards a ceasefire in Mindanao, but expressed his concern that the continuous fighting in the region has had a negative impact on AFP troop strength in other parts of the country. After breakfast, the Ambassador met with the U.S. troops currently deployed with AFP forces in Mindanao to thank them for their contributions.

[1](#)4. (U) The focus of the trip was the Ambassador's meeting with Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lorenzo Lobregat, an important stakeholder in the peace process and a vocal opponent of the aborted Memorandum of Agreement between the Philippine government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Mayor Lobregat told the Ambassador he supports the peace negotiations, but opposes the Memorandum of Agreement because the people of Zamboanga City (who are primarily Christians) do not wish to become part of an expanded Moro autonomous region. He expressed concern about the increased numbers of kidnappings in the region, particularly of aid workers in the nearby island of Basilan. He also complained that Zamboanga City is unfairly perceived as a conflict zone, because press reports covering fighting elsewhere carry the Zamboanga byline, as most regional media is based in the city. On a positive note, the Mayor said the global economic downturn did not seem to be affecting the city.

PROMOTING GOODWILL

[1](#)5. (U) The Ambassador used the theme of Thanksgiving to highlight U.S. assistance for the region. She attended the ground breaking of

a new birthing center with Lt. General Allaga, the JSOTF-P Commander, and Mayor Lobregat. In her remarks, the Ambassador stressed the importance of health-based initiatives and praised the Mayor for his leadership in this area. The birthing center project is a partnership between the AFP, JSOTF-P, Zamboanga Medical Center, and a local college for midwives. JSOTF-P donated construction funds for the center, which will be built with the assistance of Navy Seabees (Construction Battalion Sailors). By providing primary maternity care for low-risk women, the birthing center will support the UN Millennium Goal of decreasing maternal and infant mortality in the region.

¶6. (U) The Ambassador then launched a USAID book fair at a local elementary school with Mayor Lobregat and the USAID Mission Director. The Ambassador told the hundreds of educators in attendance that the American people were proud to partner with the people of the Philippines to promote education. The Ambassador also spent time reading to children to instill a life-long interest in reading. The book fair successfully distributed 250,000 books and educational materials to schools in the region, part of a broader \$85 million USAID effort focused on basic education in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao.

¶7. (U) The Ambassador's trip was well-covered by the press, including press pull-asides at each event and a live radio interview with a popular local station. In her holiday radio broadcast, the Ambassador spoke warmly of her personal connection to Zamboanga City and emphasized the strong and enduring relationship between the United States and the Philippines.

KENNEY